



## FOUR GENERATIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

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*Four generations of community college presidents are identified and described: the founding fathers, the good managers, the collaborators, and the millenium generation. Using the framework developed by Bolman and Deal (1991), the leadership styles of these four groups are compared, with particular attention given to the current and emerging generations. A shift in style is predicted from the participatory approach preferred by presidents in the 1990s to one that allows for just-in-time responses to workforce training needs and dramatic changes in higher education resulting from globalization and the technology explosion.*

America's community colleges are celebrating their 100th anniversary in 2001. This milestone offers the perfect moment for reflecting on the leaders who created and disseminated a unique educational format that has had enormous impact on American society over the past century, opening the doors of higher education to millions of people who were previously excluded, formalizing training for most occupations, and contributing to the quality of life of communities across the nation. This centennial is also a time of transition because so many of the current community college leaders are approaching retirement.

As the 21st century begins, both the external circumstances confronting all types of organizations and the expectations of the people inside those organizations are undergoing radical and unremitting change, resulting in the consequent need—even demand—for a renewal in leadership. Community colleges are no exception. They currently function in an environment characterized by the following:

- a continuing scarcity of resources;
- changing student and staff demographics;

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- a shift in emphasis from teaching to student learning and learning outcomes assessment;
- technological developments that absorb an increasing proportion of the operating budget, challenge traditional instructional methods, and require significant retraining of staff and faculty members;
- increasing regulation by external agencies and demands for shared governance from internal constituents;
- public skepticism about their ability to meet the learning needs of contemporary consumers;
- competition from private-sector providers of high-quality training;
- blurring of service boundaries as a result of distance learning and Internet use;
- reduced emphasis on degree completion and growing interest in other forms of credentialing; and
- finally, a nearly unbearable barrage of information.

Community college faculty and staff members have reacted to the accelerated rate of change first with fear and worry about loss of control and, more recently, with a determination to assume greater control of their own destiny and a demand for greater involvement in decisions affecting them. In the face of such challenges, the patriarchal, hierarchical model of leadership that characterized community colleges when they were founded 100 years ago no longer serves. On the other hand, some of the looser, more participatory forms of leadership that have emerged in the past few years may not be as effective in the new century as they originally were.

Is it any wonder, then, that community colleges are experiencing another changing of the guard? As their leaders near their 30th, 40th, and even higher anniversaries of service, many institutions are making a transition to a new generation of presidents whose leadership style is considerably different from that of their predecessors: (a) the first generation of founding fathers, who pioneered a new and democratic form of higher education; (b) the second generation of good managers, who led the colleges through a period of rapid growth and abundant resources; and (c) the third generation of collaborators, who have drawn disparate groups together to leverage scarce resources and make access to higher education truly universal.

## THE EARLY GENERATIONS

Just who were these earlier generations of presidents and how did their backgrounds influence their leadership styles? The first two generations of presidents had many characteristics in common: They

were primarily White men who were married, in their 50s, and had risen through the academic ranks. The majority of them held doctorates, and some had served in the military during World War II or the Korean War. They exhibited a traditional leadership style within a hierarchical organizational structure, very much like their counterparts in American industry. In many institutions, both the industrial model of collective bargaining and the university model of faculty relations were adopted as well. Under these leaders, community colleges that started on a shoestring and were creative, daring, and unrestricted grew into large bureaucracies with enviable physical plants, vast resources, and considerable community support. However, by the early 1990s, most of these presidents had retired (Ross, Green, & Henderson, 1993). These founding father and good manager presidents created a form of higher education that was uniquely American and highly successful.

## THE CURRENT GENERATION

Leaders of the collaborator generation, who currently are the majority in power, have built on (perhaps *remodeled* is the better term) the strong foundation laid by the two preceding generations, enduring recessions, pressures to be more accountable, public distrust, increasing numbers of underprepared students, and the explosion of the Internet. Fortunately, this generation's distinct background and style prepared them well for the challenges of their period.

To begin with, the demographics of this third generation reflect a diversity not found in the previous two groups. According to the most recent survey of all college and university presidents conducted by the American Council on Education, the number of women presidents has nearly doubled since 1986, from 9.5% to 19.3%. The majority of these women lead public and private 2-year colleges (22.4% of community college presidents are women vs. 7.9% in 1986). The number of minority presidents has grown more slowly, from 8.1% in 1986 to 11.3%, with most of these leaders also serving at 2-year institutions (12.3% vs. 8.6% in 1986). In 1998, 6% of all presidents were African American, 3% were Hispanic, and 1% each were Asian American and Native American (Ross & Green, 2000). White men are still the majority, but presidential appointments of women and people of color continue to increase.

There appear to be some common, although not universal, characteristics in the backgrounds of these third-generation leaders, who are now senior chief executive officers (CEO) and beginning to consider retirement. As in the two earlier groups, most began their

presidencies when they were in their mid-40s to mid-50s. They are largely the offspring of lower middle class families that instilled the value of education as a means of moving upward in society, and this value has shaped their professional lives. Many of them were the first in their families to attend college, and many majored in education, humanities/fine arts, or the social sciences (Ross et al., 1993; Touchston, Shavlik, & Davis, 1993). Most significantly, many became involved in social action groups—the civil rights, antiwar, or women’s movements—during or after college. They served (and continue to do so) as volunteers for various causes, thus receiving the traditional form of training for community leadership and activism.

For the women and people of color in this third generation of community college leaders, the experience of the civil rights and women’s movements involved a sense of exclusion from the White male power structure. To deal with this, they learned techniques for manipulating the power structure by building coalitions, and they infiltrated the existing system with the aid of affirmative action laws. Many of these leaders identify strongly with their ethnicity or gender and have used their “foot in the door” status to open a dialogue with the powerful majority and crusade for the rights of their respective groups.

Another distinction between these third-generation CEOs and their predecessors is their choice for postbaccalaureate study. Although they too may have followed a career path into the college presidency that began with college or high school teaching, instead of earning master’s degrees and doctorates in traditional fields such as English and philosophy, many have earned advanced degrees in higher education or administration. Many also have prepared for leadership roles through professional development programs specific to community colleges offered by organizations such as the National Institute for Leadership Development and the League for Innovation in the Community College. They are knowledgeable in organizational behavior, change process, and quality improvement. In short, they have intentionally prepared for administrative careers, and they bring to these assignments skills that were only gained on the job by members of the previous two generations.

## **THE BOLMAN AND DEAL FRAMEWORK OF LEADERSHIP**

In gauging the leadership styles of the community college presidential generations, it is useful to refer to the framework developed by Lee Bolman and Terry Deal (1991). Bolman and Deal identified four frames—structural, human resources, political, and symbolic—within

which leaders operate. Furthermore, most leaders have a preferred frame, although the most effective leaders move from one frame to another as circumstances require, thus operating in a multiframe mode. Each of these categories is examined below with reference to the third generation of community college leaders who, as a group, appear to prefer certain frames as a result of their background and experiences.

## Structural Frame

In the structural frame, which Bolman and Deal (1991) considered to be based in sociological theory, the leader uses an understanding of formal roles and relationships to guide his or her actions. Responsibility and authority are reflected in organizational charts, and the organization has clear goals and directions. This leader is an analyst and planner who makes decisions based on established rules and policies. In contrast to the previous two generations, who seemed to prefer the structural frame, third-generation leaders actually may use this mode the least. In fact, many of these leaders entered adulthood with the belief that structure and authority were oppressive and should be circumvented or recreated. Collaborators certainly do analyze and plan—these are skills they learned well in the course of their social action efforts—but their greater talents seem to be in break-through thinking, moving outside established structures, seeking new formats for operation, and capitalizing on unanticipated opportunities.

## Human Resources Frame

The human resources frame is based in psychological theory and operates from an understanding of people's needs, values, and skills. In this frame, the effective leader creates a sense of collegiality, and the organization is marked by dedicated and familial staff members. Decisions made within this frame tend to emphasize the effect on people more than productivity or regulations. What better frame for all those 1960s liberals, feminists, civil rights activists, and environmentalists? After all, the new leaders are “people power” people.

Given the observed activities and accomplishments of the generation currently in power, it appears that this is the preferred mode of operation, particularly for women and people of color, whose leadership style emphasizes participation, win-win negotiation, consensus building, caring, and nurturing. In her book *In a Different*

*Voice*, Carol Gilligan (1982) described such leaders as operating from the “care and connectedness” orientation versus the “justice and rights” orientation that might better describe leaders operating from the structural frame. Leaders in the human resources frame (care and connectedness mode) generally operate by influencing, coaching, mentoring, forming task forces, and empowering others. They build a sense of community, and actions are taken with reference to people’s feelings and needs. This style also fits well with popular business theories on customer service, quality improvement, product teams, and management by walking around.

This type of leadership is well regarded and desirable in both men and women in today’s educational and business environments. It is interesting, however, to note that there are overtones of the old paternalism in this frame as the leader cares for and nurtures her or his people much like a parent. Furthermore, it is possible that some third-generation leaders may have felt considerable discomfort when they finally acquired real formal power. They may have been unaccustomed to wielding power that is vested in a position or role, power that is perhaps more aligned with the structural frame. Instead, these collaborator leaders have had more experience with other, less formal types of power that are based on influence and persuasion.

## Political Frame

The political frame has its basis in political science and involves people competing for power and resources. In this mode, the effective leader builds coalitions inside and outside the organization, relying on personal savvy and negotiation skills. Again, the social action background of the third-generation presidents supports a preference for this frame. Many of them are political veterans or student activists turned community activists who in their early adulthood worked on campaigns, registered voters, formed coalitions and lobbied for human rights. In this frame, the ability to develop a long list of cosponsors is seen as a sign of potent leadership. However, as with the human resources frame, the unilateral exercise of power may be uncomfortable for these so-called “politicians,” who might prefer making a deal over giving an order.

## Symbolic Frame

The fourth frame is the symbolic frame, in which symbols, rituals, and stories are used to motivate people. The basis for this frame is anthropology, and the effective symbolic leader seems to establish

an almost legendary or mythical reputation that spills over to the organization. Third-generation leaders certainly have studied books by Tom Peters and other gurus encouraging the use of vision statements and pithy narratives to inspire followers. Many third-generation leaders, in fact, became skillful in the use of symbols and slogans during their early volunteer activities. However, this frame may be the most difficult to learn and the last in which leaders function easily because a high level of maturity and confidence usually is needed to act naturally in this mode. With maturity comes an almost instinctual sense of whether situations should be addressed or ignored and when the grand gesture will work. For many of the presidents appointed in the 1990s, skill in symbolic leadership came only with experience.

## **Multiframe**

Bolman and Deal (1991) concluded by urging leaders to operate out of more than one frame, that is, to be multiframe in response to situations and contexts. They suggested that even if one generally operates from a preferred frame, there is value in stepping into another frame temporarily to think about a problem and gain additional perspectives before acting. It is probable that in a society as complex and sophisticated as ours has become, the third generation of community college leaders have shown considerable skill in moving among the frames. They certainly have their preferences, but through both the study of management theory and practical experience, they appear to move with more ease among the frames than their predecessors did after substantial on-the-job training.

Bolman and Deal's (1991) framework for leadership, then, offers a context in which to analyze the management style and contributions of the current group of community college presidents, including the growing number of women. The unique background of these individuals—especially their experiences during the 1960s when social action was at a peak—has resulted in a tendency to operate from the human resources and political frames of reference. The more participatory style of these leaders has been particularly effective during the last decade when workers demanded greater involvement in decisions that affected their lives and work. Finally, these leaders have grown even more effective as they learned the value of structure and the power of symbols, becoming truly multiframe in their activities.

## THE TEAM AS LEADER

The third generation of community college leaders also experienced another intriguing development in modern leadership theory—the idea of team as leader. This is the underlying concept for the product teams and quality groups that were very much in vogue in the late 20th century. John Gardner (National Association of Community Leadership Organizations, 1984) suggested the following:

The most effective leadership in the future will be provided by an individual, or better yet a loosely linked group of individuals, who have: (1) the patience to work in the context of complexity and pluralism; (2) the intellectual clarity to conceptualize a workable consensus; (3) the flexibility to revise their conception; (4) the integrity to win the trust of contending forces; and (5) the persuasiveness to mobilize a constituency of willing allies in pursuit of goals that are tolerable to all. All of these qualities need not reside in one person; they may be shared in differing degrees by the members of the group. (p. 24)

In this leadership mode, then, an entire group functions without any elected or emergent president. A personal anecdote may illustrate how such teams operate. I had an opportunity to learn about the team as leader in 1990 when I participated in a ropes course as part of a leadership development program. Our first assignment was to move all our team members from one side of a 12-ft-high wall to the other. I can assure you that is a very high wall when you stand at the foot of it. Obviously, a great deal of noise, brainstorming, and advice giving occurred before my team arrived at consensus regarding how to solve the problem. In addition, much rather unhelpful advice was offered to those of us who were afraid of heights. Moving the first few team members was not much of a problem because they could be lifted high enough to scramble over the wall onto a small platform on the other side, from which they in turn hauled others over. The real challenge came when the last team member—a tall fellow who had boosted many of us up and over—was to scale the wall. Heroically he ran, he jumped, he fell repeatedly, but he simply could not reach high enough to grasp the top of the wall. Finally, another team member (one of the small, scared ones) asked him to just stand at the base of the wall, and two others reached down and pull him up. It worked!

As I recollect this experience, I realize that the team worked its way through various stages—from the men bossing the women, to the stronger members trying to do it all, to an understanding that everyone had to contribute by hauling over at least one other member, and that no one technique would do it all. We were successful only when the



entire team began to function as leader. It is even probable that the team itself moved through Bolman and Deal's (1991) four frames: considering structures and organizations that would solve the problem, attending to the fears of some members, negotiating and forming coalitions, and using symbols and metaphors to motivate. Above all, it was necessary to develop a certain level of trust in each other and in the team to accomplish the task.

This approach to leadership offers interesting possibilities in the current environment of customer service, quality improvement terms, and attention to process as much as product. It is also possible that the third generation of community college presidents may function particularly well in the team as leader context because of their previous social action experiences and their preference for group problem solving. In particular, those women who generally operate in Gilligan's (1982) care and connectedness mode may find this approach valuable.

## ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

No discussion of leadership would be complete without examination of yet another element—ethics. At the moment, America is experiencing a crisis of confidence in its leaders, with many questioning the ethics and motives of politicians and other public figures. This skepticism extends to colleges and universities and their leaders as well, and it probably has contributed to decreasing public funds and increasing calls for accountability and regulation. There is great interest, consequently, in the topic of ethical leadership in academia. Among other efforts, the Presidents Academy of the American Association of Community Colleges developed a statement of presidential ethics in the early 1990s, and the Association of Community College Trustees adopted a similar statement for trustees in 2000.

The expectation of ethical behavior in leaders is not really new or different, but the intense public scrutiny may be, particularly when it is stimulated by instantaneous media coverage. Nor is the issue of ethical behavior especially complex. In their book *The Power of Ethical Management*, Kenneth Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale (1988) proposed a checklist that is at once comprehensive and simple. When faced with an apparent ethical dilemma, three questions should be asked:

1. Is it legal? That is, does it break any laws?
2. Is it balanced? In other words, is it fair to all concerned, or does it give one party extreme advantage over the other party? Does it promote win-win relationships?

3. How will it make me feel about myself? Would I want my family to know about this? How would I feel if this were published on the front page of my hometown newspaper? (p. 20)

According to Blanchard and Peale, honest application of the checklist should result in ethical leadership.

If there is any distinction between the first two generations of community college leaders and the third generation with regard to ethics, it would seem to be on the latter two points of Blanchard and Peale's (1988) checklist. In both groups the intention certainly would be to provide ethical leadership, but the earlier generations may have concentrated on the legality of a matter whereas the newest leaders may be more sensitive to the impact on people and the desire to maintain and strengthen relationships. Here, too, the tendency toward Gilligan's (1982) care and connectedness mode in either female or male leaders may support attention to the latter two checkpoints.

## **A NEW GENERATION FOR A NEW CENTURY**

In 1995, the Community College League of California (CCLC) initiated a periodic study of community college CEO tenure and retention. The first biennial report, issued in 1996, noted that the annual turnover rate for community college presidents nationally was 12%, a rate that had changed very little between 1984 and 1992. Departures were attributed to change of job, nonrenewal of contract, retirement or death. The study also noted that the average tenure of presidents, as determined by several national studies, was about 7.5 years (CCLC, 1996). The report speculated that the turnover rate might become considerably higher as the third generation retired and a new group assumed power.

Nationally, succession planning and leadership development have become topics for considerable discussion, somewhat in contrast to previous times of leadership transition, when generational change occurred without much planning. As part of the New Expeditions Initiative, a futuring project sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), and the Kellogg Foundation, Jeff Hockaday and Donald Puryear (2000) prepared a white paper titled "Community College Leadership in the New Millenium." On the basis of a review of the literature, Hockaday and Puryear identified nine traits of effective community college leaders: vision, integrity, confidence,

courage, technical knowledge, ability to collaborate, persistence, good judgment, and desire to lead. They described the challenges facing these institutions and reached the following conclusion:

While the future goals of community colleges will change to some degree, the leadership traits and skills that have served well in the past will serve well in the future. The issue revolves around the continued development of such traits and skills among evolving leaders. (p. 7)

They urged AACC, ACCT, state college boards, and individual colleges to be intentional in preparing the next group of presidents for effective performance in the 21st century.

Another recent study was designed to identify the qualities and skills of outstanding community college presidents as judged by their peers (McFarlin, Crittenden, & Ebberts, 2000). They found five factors that might relate positively to being identified as “an outstanding/leading community college president” by colleagues:

(a) completion of a terminal degree, (b) study of higher education and community college leadership, (c) frequent experiences with publishing and presenting scholarly work, (d) preparation as change agents, and (e) extensive involvement in both peer networks and mentorship relationships. (p. 29)

McFarlin et al. also noted that roughly one half of the presidents surveyed had risen through the academic ranks from teaching to chief academic officer, most frequently in a community college rather than another sector of higher education.

There is one finding of this study that could be of some concern since the presidents who were surveyed were for the most part members of the third generation and included more women and people of color than the earlier generations. Using data from the study (peer judgments), the authors developed a composite of an outstanding/leading community college president:

a married White male ... about 55 years old, has served as a community college president for 14 years, has been at his current institution for slightly more than 10 years, and achieved his first community college presidency at 41 years of age. (p. 28)

It appears, then, that the traditional male leader is still viewed as the ideal by many in the field despite the growing diversity among CEOs.

So, as the third generation of community college leaders contemplates passing the baton, what do we know about the emerging fourth

group of presidents? Demographically, they closely resemble the third group (Ross & Green, 2000), but most were born after the world wars, and the civil rights movements that shaped their immediate predecessors occurred while they were in grade school. The personal computer and the Internet have transformed their professional activities and private lives, and they are completely comfortable—truly dependent—on these tools. Rather than thinking in a flow-chart format, they are menu-oriented and open to many more possibilities. These new leaders are already skilled collaborators because as rising administrators they have played major roles in negotiating partnerships with government agencies, business and industry, and K–12 schools. Their emphasis is workforce development rather than social justice. And, these millenium leaders (for whom a better label is yet to come) have trained more intentionally for top leadership positions than any previous group. Overall, these fourth-generation leaders appear to be more sophisticated and knowledgeable than their predecessors as they step into the CEO role.

The major challenges confronting community colleges were outlined earlier, and the emergent leadership appears to be well prepared to address them. One of the challenges facing the millenium generation is of particular interest here because of its implications for leadership style. A report issued in 1996 by the Association of Governing Boards Commission on the Academic Presidency described the situation as follows:

The greatest danger we see is that in this new era of growing doubts and demands, colleges and universities are neither as nimble nor as adaptable as the times require. Why? Because the academic presidency has become weak. The authority of college and university presidents is being undercut by all of its partners—trustees, faculty members, and political leaders—and, at times, by the presidents' own lack of assertiveness and willingness to take risks for change. (p. x)

This apparent indictment of the third generation's participatory leadership style concludes with a call to redefine "the role of the major stakeholders in the academic enterprise." The Commission urged presidents to "lead a process ... of clarifying the precise nature of shared governance, ... reducing the ambiguities in authority and decision-making processes ... (and to) exercise the authority already inherent in the position" (p. xi). When considered in the light of Bolman and Deal's (1991) framework, this recommendation seems to encourage a return to the structural frame. When coupled with the pressure to respond at the speed of the

Internet and the blurring of traditional organizational boundaries, it may suggest moving from the broad participation inherent in the human resources frame to the deal-making and coalition building of the political frame. Whatever the frame or combination of frames, however, leaders in the 21st century will have to inspire trust in their followers to move forward during a period in which higher education is recreating itself.

It will take a few years for the emerging fourth generation of community college presidents to exhibit a collective personality that will allow researchers to label their leadership style and identify their preferred frame. Meanwhile, we do know that these leaders are very well prepared for what lies ahead. They will build on 100 years of excellent leadership by their predecessors, combining skills in motivating and managing people with political acumen and a strong business sense to transform community colleges into the institutions of choice for learning across the lifespan in the 21st century.

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